

Reflections On

Architectural Education of the Muslim World within a Global World

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Keywords

architectural education discourse, teaching idiosyncrasies, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Inquiry-Based Learning (IBL), active learning, experiential learning

Abstract

This commentary is premised on more than three decades of research into architectural education and design pedagogy. It argues that architectural education in the Muslim world must be able to operate effectively within the global condition. It contends that the body of knowledge on architectural education can be enriched and its scope can be expanded when both historical and contemporary imperatives are clearly contextualized. The text raises important questions for future discussions on this theme. Notwithstanding, the article discusses some of the negative idiosyncrasies that follow models inherited from the past and adopt techniques practiced by their Western counterparts. It proposes a framework for incorporating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a paradigm for critical consciousness and the way in which key techniques can be utilized. The thrust is that these techniques offer students learning opportunities that invigorate their capabilities to shift from passive listeners to active learners and from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers.

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- Architectural education discourse
- Teaching Idiosyncrasies
- Appreciative Inquiry (AI)
- Inquiry-Based Learning
- Active Learning
- Experiential Learning

This commentary is premised on more than three decades of research into architectural education and design pedagogy. It argues that architectural education in the Muslim world must be able to operate effectively within the global condition. It contends that the body of knowledge on architectural education can be enriched and its scope can be expanded when both historical and contemporary imperatives are clearly contextualized. The text raises important questions for future discussions on this theme. Notwithstanding, the articles discusses some of the negative idiosyncrasies that follow models inherited from the past and adopt techniques practiced by their Western counterparts. It proposes a framework for incorporating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a paradigm for critical consciousness and the way in which it key techniques can be utilized. The thrust is that these techniques offer students learning opportunities that invigorated their capabilities to shift from passive listeners to active learners and from knowledge consumers to knowledge producers.

Historical Contextualization

Since the seventeenth century, architecture has been approached from four profoundly different standpoints – those of the academic architect, the craftsman-builder, the civil engineer, and in recent years, the social scientist. From the academic viewpoint, architecture is viewed fundamentally as a fine art in which principles of formal composition, stemming from the classical (Greek and Roman) traditions, are considered to be of greatest importance. In addition, both the craftsman and the engineer tended to place more emphasis on utilitarian and structural ends than on formal design; the craftsman-builders often came from a background of handicraft and folk traditions while the engineer would usually come from one of technology and applied mathematics. Since the arrival of sociology, founded in the early nineteenth century by Henry de Saint-Simon and named by his disciple, August Comte, in the 1830's, the social implications of architecture have increasingly influenced the concepts of mass housing and urban design.

Congruent with the preceding historical approaches to architecture, four different types of architectural education were developed: academic, craft, technological, and sociological. Academic education underscores the study of compositional theory and the traditional principles of formal design as the most important aspect of an architect's education. These principles, considered to be most satisfactorily, are acquired in schools or academies, where practicing and experienced professors are well acquainted with the best design principles. In contrast, craft training in architecture has stressed the achievement of proficiency in the building trades, a proficiency that can either be learnt on the job under a master craftsman, or more commonly nowadays, in architectural or craft schools. The main aim of this type of architectural education is to train craftsman builders who can erect buildings rather than making designs to be carried out and built by others.¹ However, while the design taught in the academies was primarily based on formal considerations with 'beauty' as the main outcome, in technical schools emphasis was placed on the application of scientific principles to specific problems, with utility and economy as end goals. Under the influence of the new disciplines of sociology and social science, architectural schools were expected to emphasize pragmatic principles; thus they not only stressed the social function of buildings and the proper relation of these to socio-physical contexts, but also gradually, paid careful attention to planning and designing for different types of users.²

Formal architectural education as we know it today has translated the ways in which architecture has been approached historically and the associated types of training. In essence, it has been developed as a result of government initiatives as was the case of the *Beaux-Arts* and the Art Academies in France, or craft and guild movements as was the case of the *Bauhaus* in Germany and its counterpart *Vkhutemas* in Russia. In terms of approach, content, and focus, these schools represent the principal models of architectural education and have been developed into variations that were adopted and adapted in other parts of Europe, North America, and later to other part of the world including the Muslim world.

Contemporary Problematization

Far from homogeneous architectural education in the Muslim world has ensued along different schools of thought depending upon the region and the national setting. This makes it almost impossible to capture one unique image of the qualities and characteristics of architectural education in Islamic countries. Various studies suggest that in many cases it began during colonial periods, adopting educational models of the ruling colonial power. In other cases, systems of education were wholly imported, following approaches that seemed suitable at the time. In a few cases, some nations within their broader region have influenced others. Currently, each nation, or group of nations, pursues its own educational practices that are based on a combination of inherited traditional models and contemporary regional or international affiliations.³

In the Muslim world today the majority of the academic content, educational structures, curricula, modes of delivery and learning styles within the educational process of architecture are developed based on Western models. From a critical perspective, the main body of knowledge on architectural education and design pedagogy is predominantly fashioned and developed in the English-speaking world and is interrogated, debated, and reproduced mainly in the larger context of Western Europe and North America. The architectural academic community in other parts of the world including the Muslim world, is intensely predisposed by such a discourse as well as by various pedagogical trends typically introduced in Western academia to reflect the needs of future professionals and the profession at large. Mainly, these represent tendencies that are instigated and practiced within the contextual particularities of Western academia including the ambitions and constraints of academic institutions, the professional milieu, and the way in which architecture is practiced and produced. Classically, such an influence manifests itself in the fact that in any discussion about pedagogy in architecture in Muslim world's academia the discourse which characterizes the Global North dominates and thus overshadows opportunities for developing another parallel, or in fact different but equally critical discourse which can be generated and developed to address other unique particularities relevant to the Muslim world.⁴

Questions Arise!

An integral part of the discussion within the preceding contextualization and problematization is a number of questions and possible topics, which can trigger thinking about architectural education in the Muslim world; its contents, structures, processes, routine practices, and religious and cultural particularities. These may include:⁵

- How various contemporary interests—such as tradition, identity, modernity, vernacularism, post-colonialism, poverty, sustainability, and globalization—originate within architectural curricula?

- How the preceding interests act as drivers or catalysts for studio projects and processes?
- How international accreditation approaches and processes address the particularities of the Muslim world? And how schools develop contextualized approaches to international standards?
- How international partnerships and summer schools can inform studio practices and enrich cross-cultural dialogues between students from the Muslim world and students from other parts of the world?

Responding to these questions goes beyond the scope of this commentary. Yet, there have been a few studies that instigated efforts towards providing responsive answers relevant to the content and context of the Muslim world. However, these studies represent individual attempts rather than general trends.⁶

Sustained Negative Idiosyncrasies

Following models inherited from the west and adopting techniques practiced by their Western counterparts, architectural educators in the Muslim world strive to impart the knowledge requisite for successful practice; however, the approach to this is often divergent and may depend on the priorities and ideals of the educator. Nevertheless, despite the amount of knowledge that may be divulged, it is the way in which such knowledge is transmitted that has actually significant professional and social implications.⁷ Concomitantly, there is an urgent need to confront issues that pertain to the nature of reality -‘what’ and the way in which knowledge about that reality is conveyed to future professionals -‘how.’ Traditional teaching practices suggest that gaps frequently exist between ‘what’ and ‘how.’

In traditional design pedagogy typically followed in educational practices within the Muslim world, architecture students are habitually encouraged to utilize site visits and walkthroughs of the built environment to observe different phenomena. Unfortunately however, research indicates that such casual visits and exercises are often not structured to support any form of investigation or inquiry. Likewise, for large classes, a site visit is often confronted with logistical difficulties that may result in little opportunity for individual student mentoring. In this context, three major idiosyncrasies can be envisaged;⁸ these continue to characterize teaching practices in many schools around the world, but in particular within the Muslim world and can be outlined as follows:

Learning theories about the phenomena versus getting the feel of the behavior of the phenomena: when teaching any body of knowledge, there is a frequent tendency to present it as a body of facts and present architectural theories as a process of criticism. Knowledge is usually presented to students in a retrospective way; the term retrospective here means extensive exhibition of the performance of the work of an architect over time. Often abstract and symbolic generalizations used to describe research results do not convey the feel of the

behavior of the phenomena they describe. Additionally knowledge acquired in this rote manner is often internalized, as it has no outlet for application.

The real versus the hypothetical: Educators frequently tend to give hypothetical design projects which results in the neglect of apprehending many important contextual variables. Typically, educators focus on offering students ready-made interpretations about the built environment rather than providing them with genuine opportunities to explore issues that are associated with the relationship between culture and the built environment. Even if they do give them such a task, they place emphasis on one single culture, which is their own. To ameliorate this glaring pedagogical shortcoming, learning from the actual environment should be introduced wherein students experience active learning in parallel to problem solving.

Architectural educators in the Muslim world are aware of this lack and are advocates of introducing real life issues in architectural education. While published experiences have debated innovative practices in the design studio,⁹ there has been less emphasis placed upon the way in which structured experiences could be introduced in theory and lecture-based classes.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI): A Milieu for the Critical Thinker

While many pedagogical concepts have been developed by Western scholars within the Western context, the notions I am introducing in this content are very relevant to the Muslim world as they are centered on the particularities of the context both in terms of the content of knowledge and the content of experience.

Emerging from the fields of organizational behavior and management, AI has been regarded as "... the art and practice of asking questions that strengthen a system's capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential." It is also viewed as a form of action research that is visionary in nature and aims to create new ideas and images that aid in developmental change.¹⁰

Inquiry-based learning can be conceived under AI; an instructional method developed during the sixties in response to a perceived failure of more traditional forms of instruction¹¹ and rote learning wherein students were required to simply memorize and reproduce instructional materials. Active and experiential learning are sub-forms of inquiry-based learning (IBL): in this methodology progress is assessed by how well students develop experiential, critical thinking and analytical skills rather than how much knowledge they have acquired. A number of recent studies challenge university educators to develop integrative teaching approaches that more fully represent transformative pedagogies: educators need to move away from thinking of students as passive listeners and encourage them to become active learners.¹² However, despite this being easier said than done, the incorporation of active learning strategies into the daily routine of classroom instruction has now become a necessity.

The most significant characteristic of active learning is student involvement: students are actively engaged in individual or group activities during the class session, these may

include reading, discussing, commenting, and exploring tasks, ideas and theories. Rather than declamatory orator, the instructor takes on the more active role of facilitator and/or mentor and can thus provide students with immediate feedback.¹³ Notably, in active learning sessions students are involved in accessing higher order thinking; this simultaneously involves the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of a wide spectrum of issues and phenomena. In the context of an active-learning university classroom, students are engaged not only in doing things but also in reflecting and thinking about what they are doing.

Experiential learning has developed into an important paradigm based on the works of John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and David Kolb. They argued that a practical, hands-on experience should be an integral component of any teaching/learning process; this rationale must apply to classroom settings. Therefore, experiential learning goes against learning in which the learner only reads about, hears about, talks about, or writes about realities but never comes in contact with as part of the learning process. Experiential learning is first hand learning in which the learner is directly in touch with the realities being studied.¹⁴

Moving Forward with Responsive Approaches

In the context of architectural education in the Muslim world there are educators who mistakenly equate experiential learning only with 'off campus' or 'non-classroom' learning, not conceiving how it could be very effectively applied to the classroom setting. For example, instead of providing students with dull lectures about theories of architecture and the work of famous architects, a class in the history of architecture or urban design, or a class in design theories might incorporate periods of student practice on theory exercises and critical thinking problems. Likewise, a class in 'principles of architectural design' or in 'human-environment interactions' might involve critical analysis exercises on how people perceive and comprehend the built environment. Both classes could require field visits to buildings and spaces where students are in close contact with the environment, thus enabling them to better explore aspects of culture, diversity, and people's behavior, while actively being part of that environment. Hence, these mechanisms involve an experiential learning component which, in turn, enables students to experience and explore first-hand the problems they examine or discuss in the classroom setting.

Learning through experience involves not merely observing the phenomenon being studied but also doing something with it or to it, for example testing its dynamics or applying a theory to learn more about it and/or achieve desired results. Assessment of environments as a valuable research vehicle that needs to be introduced in lecture courses; this can help establish a solid knowledge base about the built environment which will enable students to have more control over their learning, knowledge acquisition, assimilation, and utilization in future experiences.

The previous discussion suggests that active and experiential learning as concepts and instructional strategies are actually two sides of the same coin; both solidly underpin inquiry-based learning. While they may differ in certain terminology, both nevertheless

represent interactive learning mechanisms that share similar aims and qualities and both can be part of an AI process. Both increase student motivation by placing strong emphasis on the exploration of attitudes and values, knowledge production and developing critical thinking skills rather than simply focusing on knowledge transmission or knowledge regurgitation.

While including assessment research and active and experiential learning as interactive learning mechanisms that enable the effective comprehension and dissection of the built environment, it is also important to involve architecture and design students in assessment processes that are conducted objectively and systematically: casual interviews or observations may only reveal what is already known, not what has been learnt and internalized. Through experiential learning, students are actively engaged; they learn about the problems and potentials of existing environments and how or whether they meet user needs, enhance and celebrate their activities, and foster desired behaviors and attitudes.

Underlying AI relevant aspects of organizational change are important in the context of classroom instruction within a course or a program in architecture. Students are given the opportunity to organize themselves in teams, make selections of environments they see relevant to assess, collaborate effectively in group discussions, and in collectively developing arguments and making qualitative and quantitative judgments about those environments. Addressing these aspects in assessment exercises or projects enable the development of skills that include listening and respecting the views of others, and negotiation and reaching consensus in making judgments about the qualities of an environment; skills that are integral to successful architects and urban designers.

Conclusion

Architectural education in the Muslim world continues to operate within a global world. There are significant opportunities to experience, experiment with, and learn from traditional and vernacular contexts. However, content should not be treated as the ultimate end, goal, but the approach to grasp and comprehend that content should be viewed as important driver for contextualizing issues relevant to the particularities of a Muslim context.

A considerable portion of students' education in architecture is based on 'experience,' 'making' and 'active engagement.' Students are encouraged to study the existing built environment and attempt to explain it through theories or typologies, by always looking at and even referring to outstanding examples. However, underlying these approaches are hidden assumptions about the built environment and the people associated with it. It is in this grey area, in this vague and often inchoate relationship wherein lies the 'lesson' to be learnt. Hence, the integration of structured learning experiments could effectively produce a more profound learning and foster the establishment of links between the existing dynamic environments, the concepts and theories that purportedly explain them, and the resulting learning outcomes. Accordingly, the contribution of AI lies in the fact that the inherent, subjective, and hard to verify conceptual understanding of the built environment can be

refined and harmonized by the structured, documented interpretation performed in a systematic manner that promotes critical thinking and reflection.

¹ The term 'civil engineer' was first used in 1763 by the English Engineer Joan Smeaton to distinguish civil from military engineer. See Donald Drew Egbert, *Beaux-arts Traditions in French Architecture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981 p.117).

² See expanded discussion on the history, evolution, and contemporary practices in architectural education in Ashraf M. Salama, *Spatial Design Education: New Directions for Pedagogy in Architecture and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2015).

³ See Summary Report: Survey of Architectural Education and Professional Practice in Selected Areas of the Muslim World (Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 2007).

⁴ An earlier similar argument was introduced in an editorial of a special issue *Charrette: Journal of the Association of Architectural Educators*. See Ashraf M. Salama, *From the Global South: Pedagogical Encounters in Architecture*, *Charrette* 5:1 (2018) [in press].

⁵ A. M. Salama (2018), *Ibid.*

⁶ *Architecture Education in the Islamic World* (Ahmet Evlin, ed. 1986) seems to be the first of its kind, an important edition that was based on the Seminar Ten in the series of Architectural Transformations in the Islamic World, held in Granada, Spain. The book offers important arguments that contextualize architectural education within unique cultural and religious locales, with contributions from world renowned scholars, theorists, and art and architecture historians including Christian Norberg-Schulz, Gulzar Haider, Hasan Uddin Khan, Ismail Serageldin, Jamel Akbar, Mohammed Arkoun, Renata Holod, and Spiro Kostof. Issues related to architectural education and the content of knowledge needed in an Islamic milieu are debated, including discussions on the history and evolution of architectural education in Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Iran, Iraq, Morocco, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey. This is coupled with a discussion of the content and structure of the Aga Khan Programme for Islamic Architecture at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and how architectural education in the countries represented in the book was influenced by various schools of thought and curriculum models within the Global North including France, Germany, Switzerland, United Kingdom, and the United States. See Ahmed Evlin, ed., *Architectural Education in the Islamic World* (Geneva: Aga Khan Trust for Culture, 1986). Additional survey were undertaken by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in 1992 and 2007.

⁷ Sanjoy Mazumdar, Cultural Values in Architectural Education. *Journal of Architectural Education* 46: 4 (1993): 230-237.

⁸ Ashraf M. Salama, Seeking New Forms of Pedagogy in Architectural Education. *Field Journal* 5: 1 (2013): 9-30.

⁹ A. M. Salama (2015), *Ibid.*

¹⁰ The work of David Cooperrider is a manifestation of the growing interest in Appreciative Inquiry. See: David Cooperrider, *An Appreciative Inquiry: Rethinking Human Organization* (Champaign, IL: Stipes Publishing, 2000), 42.

¹¹ See Russell A. Ackoff, *Redesigning the Future: A Systems Approach to Societal Problems* (New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, 1974) and Jerocie S. Bruner, The Act of Discovery. *Harvard Educational Review* 31: 4 (1961): 21-32.

¹² A. M. Salama (2013), *Ibid.*

¹³ See C. Bonwell, Building a Supportive Climate for Active Listening. *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, 6:1 (1996): 4-7, and E. Dean, Teaching the Proof Process: A Model for Discovery Learning. *College Teaching* 44: 2 (1996): 139-144.

¹⁴ Ashraf M. Salama and Laura A. MacLean, Integrating Appreciative Inquiry (AI) into Architectural Pedagogy: An Assessment Experiment of Three Retrofitted Buildings in the City of Glasgow. *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 6:2 (2017): 169-182. [10.1016/j.foar.2017.02.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foar.2017.02.001)

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